

The big



By Mark Boriek

Principal Fisheries Biologist

The Delaware River is quickly becoming one of the premier fishing destinations in the Northeast, boasting both a variety and a quality of fishing unparalleled in the tri-state area. Today, more fish species are available to boat anglers, shore anglers and wading anglers than at any time in the river's history. For nearly all of New Jersey's 8.5 million residents, the Delaware is no more than 60 miles away. Most Garden State anglers who live near the river know its bounty. Those farther from its shore are discovering it's well worth the trip to explore this fishing paradise anglers call "The Big D."

Late winter is the prime time to target one of the best tasting of all freshwater fish, the walleye. Walleyes begin to congregate in pools, just below rapids, before spawning. The best areas to find them are north of the Route 78 bridge, although anglers chasing other species frequently catch walleyes as far south as Trenton, a rare occurrence just a decade ago. Since 1996, however, Fish and Wildlife has supplemented the limited natural production of walleye in the river with 605,000 walleye fingerlings averaging 1.7 inches.

One of the most effective lures is an eight-inch, motor-oil-colored rubber worm on a one-eighth ounce jig. If you prefer live bait, leeches, lampreys and night crawlers work well.



Walleyes are also being targeted more and more by fly fisherman. One successful fly fisherman goes after them in the Trenton Falls area after dark in October, and uses a sinking line and a Clouser Minnow that resembles a juvenile American shad migrating to the ocean.

At about the same time walleyes begin to congregate, adult American shad leave the ocean and enter the river to begin their annual spawning run. The water temperature is still well below the 50 F that induce shad to strike a lure. Still, some hard-core shad anglers are drawn to the river in a quest for the season's first shad, usually produced in mid-March by the warm water flowing from the Mercer Generating Station in Trenton. Shortly thereafter, shad are caught near the warm-water discharge from the Reliant Generating Station upriver in Portland, Pa. Catches typically increase throughout the spring as the water continues to warm, but a sudden cold snap will surely shut down the bite. Boat anglers generally favor flutter spoons, while shore anglers stick with traditional shad darts. Both are available in solid or multicolored varieties; invariably, chartreuse is part of the combination, with one exception: the gold-plated dart. Some anglers say larger lures work best early in the season, preferring to save smaller ones, such as micro-darts, for later. Shad arriving very late and some post-spawned shad are regularly caught on spinners. A silver Mepps #2 is a good choice.

Midway through the shad run, river herring, also on a spawning run, begin showing up in the Trenton area. Then, hot on the herring's tail fins are the striped bass. Anglers enjoy chasing both species, first catching the herring on multiple bare gold hooks (3-hook Sabiki rig) to use as bait to live line for stripers. It's exciting to see a big striped bass strike a surface lure, such as a pencil popper, which mimics an injured herring. Swimming plugs also prove productive. Before 1990, striped bass were largely absent from the river. Improved water quality in the Delaware, coupled with commercial and recreational fishing closures and hatchery stockings, sparked a striped-bass resurgence that far exceeded anyone's expectations.

When the stripers show up, many American shad anglers pack away their shad darts, preferring instead to try for the larger, less finicky predator. But that can be a big mistake, since there are lots of shad to be caught through late May and into early summer.

Also thought to be a rarity, but showing up in big numbers in recent years is the hickory shad. Anglers use shad darts to catch and release this smaller relative of the American shad in areas of the river at Washington's Crossing and Lambertville. Two key characteristics of the hickory shad are a protruding lower jaw and an immediate launch out of the water when hooked.

Smallmouth bass are the river's bread-and-butter recreational fish, and were the most frequently caught fish in a 2002 creel survey. A total of 99,540 were caught; about one percent or 1,428 were harvested. In the early spring, skilled anglers seek out the large adults preparing to spawn. Throughout the summer, smallmouth bass of various sizes are readily caught on a variety of lures (spinners, tube baits, surface and swimming plugs) and live baits (hellgrammites and crayfish are best)

downstream to Trenton. Below that point, largemouth bass dominate. Fall is another productive time. The smallies feed heavily before the winter sets in.

It is probably safe to say that channel catfish inhabit nearly the entire 173-mile stretch of fresh water in the river, although close to the freshwater license line, the Commodore Barry Bridge, the saltwater-tolerant white catfish are more abundant. Because channel cats are sight-feeding predators, they can be caught on artificial lures. But the really big ones that win tournaments (over 10 pounds) are caught on live American eels, also a preferred food of large striped bass. After a freshet, when the water is up into the weeds and trees, good-size channels can be caught right at your feet in the knee-high muddy water. Night crawlers, crayfish, chicken livers, and cut gizzard shad are all good baits. Gizzard shad innards (stomach and attached gizzard) are a close second to a live eel as the top bait.

James L. Leiger



Walleyes in the Delaware River even lure in "Shad Man" John Punola.

The Delaware River also is home to two of New Jersey's largest trophy fish, the muskellunge and the tiger muskie. Although the pure-strain muskies do reproduce in the river, Fish & Wildlife since 1996 has stocked 35,691 muskellunge, averaging 7.5 inches to supplement natural reproduction. The river has also received 95,588 tiger muskies averaging 7.5 inches. This sterile hybrid was first stocked in 1998. Most of the pure-strain muskie catches occur upstream from the Route 80 Bridge, while the tigers are caught farther downstream in the tidal river. Recently, there have been fewer and

fewer tiger muskie catches reported. These hybrids are notoriously elusive. Tiger muskie stocking programs are slowly being phased out in many states. It's been conjectured that the recovered striped bass population in the lower river preys heavily on these fish. The current state



In 1610, Sir Thomas West, Royal Governor of the Virginia Colony, sent Capt. Samuel Argall to sail north along the Atlantic seaboard to look for available land to expand the colony. Argall sailed into the large bay and river the Lenape Indians called "Lenapewhituck," (lun-nah-pay-wee-HIT-took), meaning tidal river of the Lenape. Argall renamed these waters as a tribute to Sir Thomas' title: Lord de la Warr. The name eventually was pronounced as one word: Delaware. A short time later, Sir Thomas headed back to England—without meeting the Lenape or seeing the river renamed in his honor. He never returned to North America.

Today, the East Coast's longest, free-flowing river (no dams) is known to most anglers simply as "The Big D" or "The River."

Pictured above: A circa 1750 portrait of Lenape Chief Lappawinsoe, who had birds and a snake tattooed on his forehead.

The Delaware River Basin encompasses one of the most highly developed urban-industrial regions in the United States. Nearly 8 million people live in the basin which drains 12,765 square miles including portions of New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware and a tiny corner of Maryland. The Delaware River stretches 330 miles from the confluence of the East and West Branches in Hancock, N. Y. to the mouth of Delaware Bay. Slightly more than half of the river—173 miles—is New Jersey fresh waters. Highly accessible, the river has more than 40 boat launching areas in New Jersey alone.

Water quality problems were observed in the basin more than two centuries ago and worsened progressively until after World War II. The Delaware River experienced a rejuvenation in the years following the Clean Water Act of 1972. Tight controls on municipal sewage and industrial effluent discharges enabled the river to rebound to the point where historical runs of anadromous fish such as shad and herring are holding their own, and striped bass are going strong. Anglers are reaping the benefits of these fisheries, putting in more than 120,000 trips every year.

— Mark Boriek

record of a 29-pound tiger muskie caught in the Delaware in 1990 still stands.

It's also worth wetting a line for redbreast sunfish, black crappie and carp, all of which prefer the calm, slower portions of the lower Delaware. Carp is the largest of these species. The current archery record, taken from the river in 1996, tipped the scales at 42 pounds. White perch, too, are abundant down river and, as a schooling species, can often be caught in large numbers. The flesh is firm, especially in the colder water of spring and fall, and it becomes white and flaky when cooked.

Be sure to visit Fish and Wildlife's Web site at www.njfishand-wildlife.com for updates on the spring American shad run, Delaware River access sites, professional fishing guides and fishing clubs.

A good reference is "The Delaware River and Its Fisheries" by J.B. Kasper, 1994. 



Scott Morgan

Although not trophy specimens, 24-inch stripers such as this one still offer a lot of excitement to anglers up and down the Delaware.

Highlights from the 2002 Multi-State Creel Survey

- Performed in the 280-mile stretch of river from Downsville, N.Y., to Wilmington, Del.
- A total of 35,281 American shad were caught with less than 20 percent harvested by anglers.
- Eighty percent of the 36,328 striped bass landed were caught between April and July. Only 1 percent was harvested.
- A total of 99,540 smallmouth bass were caught; 1,428 were harvested.
- Some 10,601 largemouths were caught, with 96 percent caught in the tidal section of the river.
- Approximately 66,545 channel catfish were caught; most were taken by boat anglers in the tidal stretch of the Delaware.
- Of the 1,813 walleye caught, 74 percent were harvested.

Another survey is scheduled for 2007!

Current State Records from the Delaware River

Carp (archery)	42 pounds	1987
Muskie, tiger	29 pounds	1990
American Shad	11 pounds 1 ounce	1984
Walleye	13 pounds 9 ounces	1993

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Final note:

A three-and-a-half-inch (number 9) floating rainbow trout Rapala is one of the best overall lures for catching assorted species in the river. Because it's a floater, it's rarely lost on a snag. Just giving some slack line, the current will usually free and lift it to the surface. Use the slowest retrieve, at which you can feel the lure working. The recommended "Rapala Knot" is a *must* for the true-to-life swimming action of this lure.

